

## High Quality Preschool Programs: What Would Vygotsky Say?

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The paper considers the definition of high quality preschool from a Vygotskian perspective. Similarities and differences in the issues faced in Russia and those in the United States are discussed as background. Three major ideas are considered from the work of Vygotsky and of his students/colleagues, Daniel Elkonin and Alexander Zaporozhets. The first is the Cultural Historical paradigm as the basis for defining development, which emphasizes the importance of underlying cognitive and social-emotional competencies. The second is the idea of “Leading Activity” with dramatic play defined as the leading activity for preschool. The third is the idea of “amplification” or enrichment rather than acceleration of learning. The article ends with a definition of quality based on these three constructs.

### *High Quality Preschool Programs: What Would Vygotsky Say?*

Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period—that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite – expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely “preschool”: from play to painting to interactions with peers and adults. (p.88)

This passage would not be out of place in one of NAEYC’s position statements cautioning early childhood educators against age-inappropriate practices. However, it is a 1978 quote from Alexander Zaporozhets, one of the closest colleagues and students of Lev Vygotsky and a life-long advocate for high quality preschool programs. Although his words sound similar to what would be written today, their theoretical and research-based roots are different, leading to an alternative rationale for avoiding inappropriate acceleration and consequently a different way of defining quality preschool.

Zaporozhets’ concept of “amplification” of development that is the expansion and enrichment of the content of appropriate activities rather than acceleration into inappropriate activities may help resolve the dichotomy that seems to exist between the contemporary proponents of “following the child’s lead” and those who believe that the mission of preschool should be to support early academic learning. While the question of what and how preschoolers should be taught has just recently moved from the realm of academic discussion to that of policy and instructional practices in the U.S., Vygotskians in Russia have been dealing with this issue for significantly longer, and their experience provides valuable insights for American educators in an era of early learning standards and debates about universal prekindergarten.

Although Vygotskian theory and over 70 years of its implementation in Russia present a valuable perspective on what high quality preschool programs might look like, this perspective is virtually unknown to most Western readers. As we learned from our experience writing and presenting on Vygotsky’s approach to early childhood education (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, 2003), familiarizing American educators with Vygotsky involves more than simply translating his work and the writings of his colleagues into English, it also requires “mapping” the issues and challenges that faced these Vygotskians onto the social-cultural context of today’s early childhood classroom on this side of the Atlantic.

Thus, to understand what the criteria of a high quality preschool program would be from the Vygotskian perspective, we will first provide a brief overview of the preschool system in Russia and the changes it has undergone in post-Vygotsky years. Next, we will summarize the principles of Vygotsky’s theory of learning and development that are most applicable to early childhood education. Finally, we will look at more recent developments in the Vygotskian tradition and their implications for early childhood education and the definition of quality preschool programs.

#### *Preschool in Russia*

Russians have debated over which ages should be considered “preschool.” In Russia the term “preschool” traditionally described children between the ages of 3 and 6. Ages younger than 3 are referred to as infancy (0 to 1) and “early age” (1 to 3), and as a rule these

children do not attend center-based programs in the same numbers as preschoolers. Russians have considered kindergarten to be the place where children become “initiated” into school life by participating in activities that are partially preschool- and partially school-like. The effort to change 6-year-olds from their traditional status as a part of early childhood to part of formal elementary schooling is a relatively recent phenomena in Russia. This move was strongly opposed by such “founding” Vygotskians as Daniel Elkonin and Alexander Zaporozhets who fought to keep 6-year-olds in preschool as was customary in Vygotsky’s own time. Similar battles over the status of kindergartners as merely smaller, younger first graders or as a unique transition grade are being fought in the US.

Until the 1990’s Russia had a national preschool curriculum as did other republics of the former Soviet Union. Today, there is greater diversity in preschool programs offered both in terms of their formats and the content of the curriculum being used. Many of these early childhood programs were and are still guided by old sets of standards from the Soviet era worded primarily in the terms of children’s outcomes narrowly defined in terms of “KoSHes” (which stands for KnOwledge, Skills, and Habits”). These standards are contrary to the tenets of the Vygotskian approach, which emphasizes underlying competencies instead of specific facts and skills. These narrowly defined standards have resulted in problems similar to those faced in the US, such as the restriction of content to the limited number of skills and knowledge being evaluated. Contemporary Russian educators have developed a new set of criteria to define high quality preschool programs that are consistent with the main principles of the Vygotskian approach (e.g., Yudina et al., 2000). We have included these views in the discussion that follows.

### *The Vygotskian Approach to Learning and Development in Preschool Aged Children*

There is much in common between the issues being addressed by Russian educators and educators in the United States. The attempt to define preschool programs in Russia can help American educators view their issues from another perspective. We turn now to three constructs that form the foundation of a Vygotskian definition of quality preschool programs. Developed by Vygotsky and two of his colleagues and students, Daniel Elkonin and Alexander Zaporozhets, these constructs are the Cultural Historical Theory of Development, play as a leading activity during preschool, and the concept of amplification.

### *Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical Paradigm as the Basis for the Theory of What Develops During the Preschool Age Period*

The core idea of Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical theory is that the history of human development is a complex interplay between the processes of natural development that are determined biologically and the processes of cultural development brought about by the interaction of the growing individual with other people. Consequently the issue is not whether it is nature or nurture, but how nature and nurture work in concert. What happens as a result of these interactions is more than the simple acquisition of values, expectations, or competencies promoted by a specific culture. What happens is that the entire system of naturally determined mental functions becomes restructured to produce what Vygotsky described as higher mental functions (1983/1997):

...when the child enters into culture, he not only takes something from culture, assimilates something, takes something from outside, but culture

itself profoundly refines the natural state of behavior of the child and alters completely anew the whole course of his development. (p. 223)

The preschool age period is the one during which this restructuring goes through its initial stages as children's use of cultural tools transforms perception and begins to transform other cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and thinking. In addition to cognitive processes, social-emotional capacities are similarly transformed. As these cognitive and social-emotional capacities develop, preschool children make the transition from being "slaves to the environment" to becoming "masters of their own behavior." In Vygotsky's view, one of the accomplishments of the preschool years is children's overcoming their impulsive, reactive behavior that is a "knee-jerk" response to the environment thus becoming capable of intentional behavior. Instead of remembering the brightest, most salient feature on a page of a book, children can now deliberately remember specific features, ignoring those that are not relevant regardless of how bright and enticing they are. Instead of immediately grabbing a toy that another child has, the intentional child can think about strategies to solve this social problem or ways to keep anger under control. Intentional behavior is developed through the use of self-regulatory private speech and through participation in make-believe play, both of which pave the way for the development of higher mental functions.

Vygotsky (1983/1997) describes the development of higher mental functions as a gradual process involving the transition from inter-individual ("inter-mental") or shared to individual ("intra-mental"). Higher mental functions are shared, meaning that they are co-constructed—constructed by the child in interaction with another person. For young children, most higher mental functions still exist only in their inter-individual form as preschoolers share them with adults or with older children through the process of co-construction.

Every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an "inter" mental category, then within the child as "intra" mental category. This pertains equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, to the formation of concepts, and to the development of will." (Vygotsky, 1983/1997, p. 106)

The nature of the cultural tools that are acquired and the outcome of their acquisition are determined by the specific interactions that occur between children and their social environment. Vygotsky called these interactions the "social situation of development," which he considered to be the "basic source" of development. The social situation of development determines Vygotsky's approach to the transition from preschool to school age, including the issue of school readiness. The social situation of development (Vygotsky, 1984/1998)

...represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual. (p. 198)

The transition from preschool to school means major changes in the social situations that the child participates in—a change in the nature of the interactions involved in schooling and in the expectations associated with the role of "student." In other words, the way that

adults interact with children as well as what adults expect children to be able to do changes between preschool and elementary school. Changes in the social situation of development include more than mere participation in the interactions. There must also be a change in the child's awareness of these expectations concomitant with changes in the child's ability to meet them. To adjust to the social situation of development of school, the child must be aware of the new expectations as well as possess the capacities to meet these expectations. To gain this awareness, the child has to actually participate in school activities and to enter specific social interactions with teachers and other student. These social interactions scaffold development by providing the support necessary for children to meet the new challenges of schooling.

The reciprocal nature of the social situation of development means that school readiness is formed *during* the first months of schooling and not prior to school entry. Children adjust to the new demands of school as they participate in school. They cannot learn to adjust out of that context. However, certain underlying competencies or accomplishments that develop during preschool make it easier for children to be ready for the new challenges of schooling. Among these accomplishments are mastery of some cultural tools, development of self-regulation, and the integration of emotions and cognition. Having developed these prerequisites, a preschool child can make the necessary transition from learning that "follows the child's own agenda" to the learning that "follows the school agenda"—one of the basic ways that the social situation of development in school differs from that of preschool (Vygotsky, 1956).

The idea of a social situation driving child development is reflected in the position Vygotsky takes in regard to child-rearing practices in general and formal education in particular. Arguing with the proponents of "following child's lead," he writes (1983/1997):

The old point of view...assumed that it was necessary to adapt rearing to development (in the sense of time, rate, form of thinking and perception proper to the child, etc.). It did not pose the question dynamically. The new point of view ...takes the child in the dynamics of his development and growth and asks *where must the teaching bring the child*. [italics added] (p. 224)

From Vygotsky's perspective, this new point of view calls for a different approach to education, an approach that focuses instruction not on the competencies already existing in a child, but on the competencies that are still "under construction"—the ones that exist in the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

In the years following Vygotsky's death, his colleagues and students continued to work on further elaboration of theoretical concepts and principles first introduced by Vygotsky as well as on the development of practical applications of these principles. The names most closely associated with advancing the Vygotskian approach to early childhood theory and practice are Daniel Elkonin (1904-1984) and Alexander Zaporozhets (1905-1981).

*Elkonin's Theory of Periods in Child Development and the Role of Play as the Leading Activity of Preschoolers*

Daniel Elkonin, known in the West for his work in literacy, actually developed a comprehensive theory of child development based on Vygotsky's ideas of critical ages in

development and the social situation of development. Elkonin viewed childhood as determined by the social-cultural context and by a child's role in it as expressed through the child's engagement in *leading activity*. Leading activities are interactions that are unique to a specific period of child development and are necessary in order to bring about the major developmental accomplishments of that period. Consistent with Vygotsky's principle of effective teaching being the one that aims at child's ZPD, Elkonin defined the goal of education as promoting developmental accomplishments at each age by supporting the leading activity specific to that age.

According to Elkonin, dramatic (make-believe) play is the leading activity of preschool-aged children raised in modern industrial and post-industrial societies. On the continuum of leading activities, play follows the object-oriented activity of toddlers and in turn is followed by learning activity of children in the primary grades (Elkonin, 1971/1977). In a thorough analysis of play, Elkonin emphasized the importance of play for children's mastery of social interactions as well as for their cognitive development and for the development of self-regulation. He identified the essential characteristics that make dramatic play the leading activity of preschoolers as the roles children play, symbolic play actions, interactions with play partners, and the rules that govern the play. Thus, only play with a specific set of features is the kind of dramatic play granted the status of leading activity. Other play-like behaviors (such as building with blocks or exploring materials and objects) are assigned secondary albeit important roles (Elkonin, 1978).

Elkonin describes mature (he used terms such as *elaborated* and *developed*) play as focusing not on the objects but rather on human interactions that occur as people interact with objects. Thus, mature play does not require realistic toys and props as children learn to use substitute objects that are different in appearance but that can perform the same function as the object-prototype. As play continues to advance, these objects-substitutes become eventually unnecessary as most of the substitution takes place in child's speech with no objects present. Another feature of mature play, according to Elkonin, is a shift from extended acting out preceded by rudimentary planning to extended planning followed by rudimentary acting out. Elkonin argues that "the more general and abbreviated the actions in play, the more deeply they reflect the meaning, goal, and system of relationships in the adult activity that is being recreated." (1978/2005b, p. 40)

Dramatic play supports cognitive development by virtue of supporting the development of abstract, symbolic thought. According to Elkonin, at the center of make-believe play is the role that a child acts out. Elkonin proposed that children do not act out the exact behaviors of the role they are acting out but rather they act out a synopsis of those actions. They, in fact, generate a model of reality or construct their own version—something that requires symbolic generalization. Children do not act out everything they have seen "mommy" or "daddy" do at home, but distill the essence of mommy-hood and daddy-hood. Elkonin concludes that in make-believe play, children learn to model reality in two different ways: when they use objects symbolically and when they act out the distilled symbolic representation of the role in the pretend scenario. In both instances, the use of symbols is first supported by toys and props and is later communicated to play partners by the means of words and gestures. Dramatic play reflects the universal path of cognitive development from concrete, object-oriented thinking and action to abstract mental action (Elkonin, 1978).

Play also supports the development of self-regulation. The power of play to support the development of intentional behaviors was attributed by Elkonin to several factors. First, to sustain play, children have to voluntarily follow the rules that dictate what actions are and are not consistent with each specific role. They must act deliberately, inhibiting behavior that is not part of that specific role. Second, to agree on the details of a play scenario or on the specific use of play props children need to spend some time prior to play in discussing

their future actions—essentially planning their play. This play planning is the precursor to reflective thinking, another aspect of self-regulatory behavior. Finally, in mature play of older preschoolers the roles children play are mostly the roles of adults (doctors, drivers, chefs, etc.) engaged in socially desirable behaviors. By imitating these behaviors in play, children learn to adjust their actions to conform to the norms associated with the behaviors of these role models, therefore practicing the planning, self-monitoring, and reflection essential for intentional behavior (Elkonin, 1978). Thus, Elkonin enriched Vygotsky's idea that play scaffolds a child within his/her ZPD thus enabling the preschool child to behave at the level where he is "a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1966/1967, p. 16)

Consistent with the main tenets of the Cultural Historical approach, Elkonin viewed dramatic play not as a spontaneous activity inherent to early childhood but rather as an outgrowth of specific interactions young children have with their older peers and adults. When these interactions are absent or lack in quality even older preschoolers may not rise to the level of mature play described above but instead continue to engage in immature play similar to one often observed in toddlers. Summarizing results of multiple studies that had focused on adults' scaffolding of preschoolers' dramatic play Elkonin concluded that "play on the threshold of the preschool years does not develop spontaneously, but forms under the influence of child-rearing" (1978/2005a, p. 18)

*Zaporozhets' Idea of the Amplification of Development and the Goals of Preschool Education.*

Alexander Zaporozhets played a prominent role in implementing Vygotsky's ideas into practice. Having founded in 1960 and directed for 20 years the All-Soviet Research Institute of Preschool Education, Zaporozhets was instrumental in creating and implementing a scientific approach to developing and enacting preschool curricula for Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union. Advancing Vygotsky's ideas of the nature of childhood, Zaporozhets further specified the benefits of rich and productive preschool years and the dangers and pitfalls of shortening this period of a child's life. According to Zaporozhets, preschool years should not be considered as simply a preparation for school. Instead, preschool age should be treated as having a value of its own, as making a unique contribution to the overall process of human development (Zaporozhets, 1978). Processes and outcomes of development—cognitive, social, and emotional—specific to preschool years are part of the systemic process of human development and as such cannot be replaced later.

This view of preschool years led Alexander Zaporozhets to formulate the philosophy of preschool education best summarized in one term he coined—*amplification* of child development. According to Zaporozhets (1986), development can be amplified (or enriched) if and when education promotes developmental accomplishments specific to a particular age and does not attempt to force the emergence of accomplishments that are the outgrowth of later ages. For preschoolers, amplification of development involves expanding and enriching of the uniquely "preschool" activities, ensuring that in these activities, children are truly functioning at the highest levels of their ZPD. While agreeing with the important role of dramatic play, Zaporozhets extended the list of essential activities to include "productive activities" (such as drawing, building, and modeling), "creative activities" (e.g., creation of poems and stories, dramatization, etc.), "practical activities" (such as participating in simple chores), and social interactions with peers and adults. Writing about the amplification of child development, Zaporozhets emphasizes that properly designed education does not stifle development of preschool children but instead promotes it, thus, presenting a logical extension of Vygotsky's principle of instruction leading child development.

Theoretical as well as applied studies done by Zaporozhets and his students demonstrate that it is possible to design a preschool curriculum that not only amplifies the development



of specific preschool competencies but also provides the foundation for future competencies, thus ensuring children's later success in academic activities (e.g., Venger, 1986).

#### Using the Vygotskian Approach to Define High Quality Preschool Education

The key concept in defining high quality of preschool education from Vygotsky's perspective is "education that promotes development." The following criteria emphasize the developmentally appropriate content of education and the specific nature of teacher-child interactions. Several have been adapted from the recent recommendations commissioned by the Russian Ministry of Education by a group of psychologists and educators (e.g., Yudina et al., 2000). From the Vygotskian approach, a quality program is one that

- *Amplifies the child's learning and development within age and developmentally appropriate activities.* A quality program focuses on the developmental accomplishments of preschool, which include the ability to engage in intentional self-regulated behaviors, the ability to use symbols, the ability to positively interact with peers and adults, and so on. Specific knowledge, skills, and habits should be viewed as a means to the development of these essential competencies and not as the end result of preschool education. Accelerating development by pushing down the expectations of later grades and making those palatable to the preschool child by going slower or covering a smaller number would not be fruitful in the long run. Content should be taught in such a way that it scaffolds the development of underlying competencies.
- *Has dramatic play as the leading activity of preschool.* Dramatic play should be considered a major, central activity for preschool children that deserves the same kind of teacher support and scaffolding as the effort that is currently spent in teaching discrete academic skills. The Vygotskian approach identifies the specific elements of play that must be supported and provides a blueprint for the classroom. Dramatic play is an important and unique context providing opportunities to learn not afforded by other classroom activities. It should not be considered something extra that can be cut to accommodate more time for academic skills
- *Promotes co-construction and individualized teacher-child interactions that scaffold development.* With the emphasis on the importance of the social context and co-construction, the focus on teacher-child interaction becomes essential. The Vygotskian approach calls for replacing approaches where children are considered passive recipients of instruction, where exposure to ideas and experience in large-group settings is sufficient. Instead a quality program is one where children become active co-constructors of their development. This type of interaction is more likely to occur when teachers work with one or two children. Preschool educators, in turn, should not emulate a "compartmentalized" approach of teaching academic subjects in school but should focus primarily on promoting general competencies and dispositions that will make young children able and willing to learn these subjects later. Working on this sub-skill and then that sub-skill or teaching this fact and then that fact are not as effective in the long run as working on the underlying skills. It means that the teachers will need to become more attuned to individual characteristics of their students and capable of scaffolding not only their learning but also their creativity, curiosity, independence, and so on.
- *Uses standards as general instructional guidelines.* Teachers should be familiar with what is typically expected from a "preschool graduate" in the areas of physical, cognitive, aesthetic, and social-emotional development. The current



system of standards often over-specify some domains, such as literacy, and fail to include or make clear others, in particular the underlying skills that Vygotskians argue are at the heart of long term growth and success in school. This leads to narrowly focused instruction that neglects important developmental areas. Furthermore, the child outcomes at the exit of preschool should be used by teachers as general instructional guidelines and NOT as a basis for testing for school readiness or for anything else. Standards should reflect what could be accomplished under optimal educational conditions. A child's individual developmental accomplishments, especially having to do with the underlying competencies, are more essential than the entire classroom's mastery of a specific skill or concept no matter how important. Preschool programs must become more varied, providing opportunities for meeting needs of children with different needs, strengths, and interests within that individual's ZPD.

- *Prepares children for later grades by emphasizing underlying competencies.* Although no longer the main goal of preschool education, for Vygotskians, school readiness still plays an important role in defining high quality preschool program because preschool is a part of the entire educational continuum. To become a successful student, a preschooler does not need to master a requisite set of skills or to acquire specific knowledge. Instead, the child has to develop general underlying social and cognitive competencies that will allow him/her to become a deliberate, self-regulated learner capable of establishing adequate social relationships with other participants in the teaching/learning process that takes place in the school. In addition, the success of school learning will depend on the child's ability to adopt a specific position of a "student" characterized by such things as the interest in the very process of learning, willingness to play by the school rules, readiness to follow the teacher's directions, and so on.

### Discussion

Returning to the original question about quality preschool education, the Vygotskian approach provides another way to examine this issue. On the one hand, Vygotskians emphasize the importance of scaffolding each child's individual, unique, developmentally based needs on one hand. On the other, they acknowledge that the underlying skills that are at the center of development are taught through content. This content is a means for instruction and learning, not its end goal. The approach considers a specific kind of dramatic play as a major activity but argues that it, too, must be scaffolded to develop into an activity that truly fosters development. The approach expands the idea of school readiness from one based on the facts that children must know to the underlying capacities that will make the learning of future skills and knowledge possible.

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